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# **From ethnic nationalisms to clashing civilizations: Reconfigurations of (un)civil religion in an era of globalization**

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## **Abstract**

*One of the main questions currently facing scholars of civil religion is how civil religions, and in particular national civil religions, are being reconfigured in response to the contemporary repositioning of the nation state within the supranational political, economic, legal and cultural orders entailed by globalization. This article first surveys some of the main arguments to emerge from the civil religion literature in this regard. It then contributes to these debates by outlining how current reconfigurations of national civil religion manifest in the case of a protest movement called the English Defence League (EDL). Specifically, this article describes how rituals and symbols of national belonging have, at least for adherents and supporters of this group, been reinvigorated by infusing them with symbols that invoke notions of civilizational belonging and are replete with references to an imminent “clash of civilizations”.*

Since the English Defence League (EDL) first emerged during the spring and summer of 2009, it has been one of the UK's, and Europe's, most controversial social movement organisations. Although the EDL initially drew its support from a network of football hooligan firms and small ultra-patriotic groups, the support base soon expanded, and during the last three years EDL activists have organised frequent mass demonstrations – anything from 500 to 2000 people – in towns and cities across the country (Copsey 2010; Jackson 2011). The focus of these protests has been, depending on which activists one speaks with, either “militant Islam” or more generally the threats that Islam is seen to pose to an imagined English way of life<sup>i</sup> (Bartlett & Littler 2011; Copsey 2010; Jackson 2011) – a focus that has situated the EDL firmly within a broader and highly significant discursive trend that has characterized the resurgence of nationalist and far right political parties and protest groups across Europe (Betz 2003; Goodwin 2011; Mudde 2007).

In this article I situate the EDL<sup>ii</sup> and their use of rituals and symbols of national belonging within the debate around one of the most salient questions currently facing scholars of civil religion - understood for the purposes of this article as “a set of social and cultural principles, values and rituals oriented toward the civil and political order<sup>iii</sup>” (Cristi 2009, p.48). This is the question of how civil religion, and in particular *national* civil religions, are being reconfigured in response to the contemporary repositioning of the nation state within the supranational political, economic, legal and cultural orders entailed by globalization (Cristi & Dawson 2007; Hvithamar & Warburg 2009). In doing so, I aim both to provide an introduction to some of the main arguments within this debate and to open up the study of the EDL and other similar groups to new theoretical perspectives.

### **National civil religions under pressure**

Since Bellah published *Civil Religion in America*, the concept of civil religion has been intimately linked to that of the nation. Indeed, one of the main contributions of the civil religion literature has been the many rich accounts it has generated of how symbols of the nation – flags, anthems, even the bodies and blood of those who fight for their country – have operated as sacred objects within rituals of nationhood (Hedetoft 2009; Marvin & Ingle 1999), and of how such symbols and rituals have in turn formed a basis for the “imagining” and “creation” of the nation (Anderson 1991; see also Gellner 1987; Smith 2000).

This focus on *national* civil religions reflects in part the prominence of the nation state in 20<sup>th</sup> century politics and socio-political thought. But it also reflects the intellectual heritage of the concept of civil religion (Bellah 1967; 1995; Turner 1991, p.51). As Bellah argues, the Durkheimian position on which he built was

that traditional religion was on its way out, essentially because it conflicts with science. But the concept of the sacred would remain [because] without this basis of moral respect society itself is impossible. But what would be the referent to which sacred symbols refer? Durkheim replied “society,” and as the most comprehensive functioning society the “nation”. (Bellah 1995, p.47).

Yet while scholarship on civil religion has tended to focus on national civil religion, several authors have also commented on the precarious position in which national civil religion finds itself in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bellah 1976; Cristi & Dawson 2007; Hvithamar & Warburg 2009). Bellah in fact even wondered whether research on civil religion may have come to prominence at precisely the time when the social and political relevance of national civil religion was already beginning to wane (Cristi & Dawson 2007).

What has put “the sacrality of national attachment in jeopardy” (Hedetoft 2009, p.263) is the way the position of the nation within the contemporary political and cultural world order has itself been brought into question (Hvithamar & Warburg 2009). The formation of legal, political, technological, moral and cultural systems that transcend the nation-state have challenged notions of national sovereignty, undermined differences between nations and made it increasingly difficult to maintain ethnically or nationally exclusive us-them dichotomies (Castells 1997; Beyer 2007; Hedetoft 2009; Wuthnow, 1994). Increased social differentiation within states, mass international migration and the formation of de-territorialised social, economic and political networks, have also augmented “the attendant distrust between masses and elites” (Hedetoft 2009, p.263) and contributed to the displacement of the nation as the primary structure of identification by an array of other identity markers that include gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexuality, modes of consumption *etc* (Beyer 2007; Demarath & Williams 1985; McGraw 2003; Santiago, 2009). In addition, particularly in Western Europe, the position of the nation and of nationalism has continued to be compromised by its symbolic associations with the colonial past (Hedetoft 2009).

Yet for Bellah, and for those that have followed Bellah, civil religion cannot simply disappear. In order to explain why this is, and to prepare the ground for the subsequent discussion, it is useful to briefly revisit what Cristi and Dawson (2007) called the dual intellectual heritage of civil religion.

One of the features of the civil religion literature is the large number of, at times divergent, formulations of the concept (Angrosino 2002; Crook 2010). These reflect two quite different intellectual traditions found in Bellah’s initial exposition. However, both traditions emphasise the centrality of civil religion within modern democracies. First, theorisation of civil religion owes much to Durkheim. Within this tradition, civil religion has tended to be conceived of as “culture religion”; as “a common set of rituals, ideas and symbols” that can “supply an overarching sense of unity even in a society riddled with conflicts” (Angrosino 2002, p.246). This tradition emphasises the integrative function of civil religion. It also conceives of civil religion as a largely spontaneous phenomenon that responds to basic social, political and psychological needs, which would previously have been at least partially met by traditional religions, thus making civil religion an *inevitable* component of *all* modern societies (Bellah 1974; Cristi 2009). Within this tradition, then, it would be impossible for civil religion to disappear unless it was replaced by another form of religion.

The second tradition, which can be traced back to Rousseau, provides a rather different theoretical perspective. This tradition places far greater emphasis on the purposive political dimension of rituals and symbols that are oriented towards civil and political order. Civil religion is conceived of as at least in part the product of the conscious actions of political elites (Cristi 2001), or of other factions within society

who may seek to “annex” civil religion to their particular cause (Parsons 2002, p.4; see also Angrosino 2002). This has two important implications. First, scholars who have engaged with this tradition have questioned the idea that civil religion serves a primarily integrative function on the grounds that it can be and has been used to exclude others and to “inflame sectarian tensions” (Angrosino 2002, p.252; see also Cristi & Dawson 1996; Long 1974; Santiago 2009). Second, by emphasising its political utility, this tradition also challenges notions about the spontaneity of civil religion. Yet whilst on this view civil religion may not be considered sociologically inevitable in the way that it is in the Durkheimian tradition, the sacralisation of national attachment is still identified as being politically indispensable in the context of modern societies characterised by a decline of traditional religion and increasing social differentiation (Crook 2010).

### **Towards a global civil religion**

If civil religion is either inevitable or indispensable, the question then concerns how civil religion might be transformed in an era of globalization, and whether the *nation* will continue to provide the focus of these practices of sacralisation.

What Bellah proposes is that the underlying sociological need for a common religion would eventually be met by the emergence of a global and unifying civil religion. He hypothesised that this could happen either through the convergence of existing national civil religions, or through the steady insertion of universalising elements into extant national civil religions (Cristi & Dawson 2007). What it would be based on, however, would not be the sacralisation of society (the nation) but the sacralisation of the person (Barker 2009; Bellah 1967; Cristi 2009). For both Bellah and Durkheim, the decline of national differences and increasing social differentiation will precipitate a situation in which the only thing that unites atomised modern individuals will be their common humanity (Cristi 2009). It would therefore be this shared humanity that became the object of the practices of sacralisation. Such a “cult of man” (Durkheim 1898/1973) would centre on the ritualisation of “the human person as the carrier of inalienable rights, dignity and freedom” (Cristi & Dawson 2007, p.285), making the human person, in its abstract form, “the repository of the sacred and the symbol of modern morality” (Cristi 2009, p.59; see also Beckford 1989; Featherstone 1990; Wallace 1973).

As Cristi and Dawson (2007) have noted, there would appear to be some empirical evidence to support such a proposal. Most notably, the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw “the global spread of the doctrine of human rights” (Cristi & Dawson 2007, p.285) through a combination of international political agreements and legal instruments, as well as through the actions of an array of “transnational issue networks” (Keck & Sikkink 1998) that have grounded much of their claim-making in notions of human rights – movements such as Amnesty, as well as various

movements for gender equality, racial equality, gay rights, and social, financial or environmental justice. Furthermore, we can also observe, as Warburg (2009) does in her account of an annual joint Danish and American festival on 4<sup>th</sup> July in Rebild, Denmark, how such universalising themes have filtered into and “coloured” local and national rituals of belonging.

### **Reconfigurations of extant civil religions**

However, it has been argued that any such transition towards a global civil religion would seem to be problematized both by the difficulty of negotiating the universal themes around which a global civil religion could cohere (Barker 2009; Warburg 2009) and by the fact that new forms of civil religion do not simply replace what has gone before them, but instead “will likely co-exist, and sometimes clash, with other religions” (Cristi & Dawson 2007, p.285). In spite of the pressures outlined above, *national* civil religions are unlikely simply to fade as long as national belonging continues to respond to a number of social, psychological and political needs. There is plenty of evidence that for the time being it still does, at least for some segments of society. Recent studies of national identification point, for example, to the salience of national identities as a source of ontological security in a world of increasingly fluid political, economic and cultural boundaries (Kinnvall 2006; Skey 2012), and even a cursory glance at contemporary European politics makes clear that there is still considerable political capital to be derived from the articulation and reaffirmation of the nation and of national identities.

Therefore, alongside the emergence of any globalised or globalising forms of civil religion, we might also expect to find numerous ways in which extant civil religions are being adjusted and adapted in response to the kinds of political and cultural pressures associated with increased social differentiation and the erosion of state sovereignty. Furthermore, given the dual intellectual heritage of civil religion, we ought also expect that these reconfigurations of civil religion: 1) comprise both spontaneous grassroots responses and more conscious efforts by the political elite or by other factions within society; and 2) that they may reflect not only an impulse towards societal integration, but also at times an impulse towards exclusion and the construction of societal boundaries.

### **Attenuated rituals of national belonging**

There have been a number of recent studies that have started to explore some of the forms that such adjustments and adaptations might take. One of these would appear to have been the attenuation of some aspects of civil religious rituals and symbols. As Parsons observes, in societies characterised by ever greater social heterogeneity, the “avoidance of over-specific civil religious symbols” that can be imbued with exclusivist agendas would seem to be necessary if civil religion is to provide a source

of cohesion rather than conflict (Parsons 2002, p.268). So, for example, looking at rituals of national belonging in Western Europe in historical perspective, Hedetoft (2009) describes how much of the “bombastic” pomp and ceremony that often characterised such rituals during the era of colonial expansion has been set aside. In its place, we tend to see national belonging ritualised in “civic, symbolic and cultural forms that are detached from politically exclusivist imagery” – fewer military parades and more public celebrations of community volunteers and charitable organisations (Hedetoft 2009, p.265).

This kind of capacity to adapt to and accommodate the socio-political complexities of the nation and of national belonging has long been integral to the ability of national civil religions to function as a source of societal integration. Indeed, using the example of the commemoration of war dead after the Civil War in the USA and the First World War in Great Britain, Parsons argues that it is precisely the ambiguities and generalizations in the performance of national civil religion that enables such rituals to promote inclusion and mitigate sectarian tensions (2002, pp.11-68). Yet, it remains unclear the extent to which highly attenuated contemporary forms of national civil religion, stripped of some their affective power, can continue to fulfil the social, psychological and political functions with which they have formerly been associated (Hedetoft 2009; Parsons 2002). And of course, some factions within a society might have little interest in mitigating sectarian tensions.

### **The “glocalisation” of civil religions**

It has also been observed that civil religious rituals and symbols may adapt by working across multiple scales – a form of adaptation that would appear particularly salient in light of the limitations of more attenuated rituals of national belonging. Although local forms of civil religion have to date received considerably less attention than national civil religions, at a time when national civil religions are confronted by growing pressures to put aside “over-specific civil religious symbols”, more localised rituals of belonging – folk festivals, celebrations of local patron saints and so forth – may respond to the integrative (and exclusionary) impulse by providing a “closer, more specific form of civil religion which genuinely unifies a particular local society” (Parsons 2002, p.266).

Yet at the same time – and in keeping with theories around processes of “glocalization” (Beyer 2007) – these localised and inherently specific civil religious symbols and rituals can also be incorporated within increasingly supra-national political and cultural structures that may enable civil religion to “move beyond narrow nationalism to include internationalist values and themes” (Parsons 2004b, p.861). For example, in Parsons' description of the cult of St. Catherine of Siena and her adoption as one of the twin patron saints of the European Union in 1999, he

traces how a set of socially specific and historically embedded local rituals that had previously been incorporated into a national civil religion have now also been inserted into the ritualisation of supra-national orders of identification (Parsons 2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2008). Similar intersections of the local, national and supra-national can be found in Warburg's (2009) description of the Rebild festival in Denmark and the way in which universal themes, such as human rights or democracy, appear to offer a basis on which the rituals and symbols of national belonging of different nations can form, at least temporarily, a type of "transnational civil religion".

### **The case of the EDL: From ethnic nationalisms to clashing civilizations**

The language and protest performances of nationalist political parties and social movement organizations, such as the EDL, can provide especially intriguing case studies of how national civil religions are adapting to the pressures associated with globalization. This is due to the fact that their adherents are particularly engaged in the sometimes conscious, sometimes sub-conscious work of reconfiguring the rituals and symbols of the nation to resonate with wider political discourses and contemporary social mores.

In the case of the EDL, and as might be expected of a broadly nationalist group, activists have worked upon conventional national civil religious symbols and rituals – national flags, St. George's Day parades<sup>iv</sup>, Remembrance Day gatherings, or events to commemorate the attacks on London of 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005. However, what has been noticeable about the EDL has been both that activists articulations of the nation have differed somewhat from those associated with many traditional nationalist or far right groups, and that the rituals and symbols deployed by EDL activists have also worked upon contemporary political meta-narratives that transcend notions of national belonging (Busher 2013; Jackson 2011).

**"How are we *racists*? We're here to defend our English culture!"<sup>v</sup>**

Although notions of the nation and national belonging are prominent in the narrative of many EDL activists, when they are articulated they have tended, for the most part, to be defined not so much by ethnicity or race or even by indigeneity, but by reference to notions of an imagined English "culture" and English/British "values" (Busher 2013). Much of the rhetoric deployed by movement leaders has been permeated with concepts of cultural threats, and concerns about the "preservation of traditional and national cultural values" have been prominent in activists' explanations of their involvement in the group (Bartlett & Littler 2011).

This discourse of "culture" and "values" is very much in keeping with trends observed elsewhere across Europe where, among the adherents of a number of



nationalist and far right groups, references to racially or ethnically defined nations appear increasingly to be eclipsed by, or at least to be set alongside, discourses about imminent cultural threats (Allen 2010; Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2005). For the EDL, this framing of the movement has been significant on a number of levels. Since the EDL first emerged, opposition groups were quick to draw comparisons with and identify organisational cross-overs between the EDL and far right groups such as the British National Party, the National Front and Combat 18. However, the EDL leadership and many of its activists have consistently sought to distance the EDL from the “traditional far right”, and in particular from the overt biological racism and anti-Semitism that has often undermined the credibility of traditional nationalist and far right groups in the UK (Copsey 2010; Jackson 2011). Concepts of a culturally-defined nation have provided activists with a means of articulating exclusivist group boundaries that have not necessarily carried with them the kind of public stigma associated with traditional far right discourses of race (Allen 2011).

What this articulation of ideas of cultural nations has also done, has been to situate the EDL within and enable its activists to tap into and contribute to powerful discursive currents within the political mainstream. The appeals to the idea of a national culture and national values made by groups like the EDL work upon similar concepts expressed either implicitly or explicitly in a raft of policy positions held by mainstream political parties. We have seen, for example, the return to the rhetoric of “British values” both within policy fields such as that of social cohesion (Kundnani 2007, pp.121-140) and in the recent forays by the leaders of the main political parties into discussions about “Britishness” or “Englishness”.

However, and of particular interest in the context of this article, EDL activists’ narratives of a culture and of a value-system under threat have also worked upon and incorporated the language and symbols associated with the rise to global political prominence of ideas about a “clash of civilizations” (Huntingdon 1993; 1997).

### **The clash of civilizations: The rise of a political myth**

Huntingdon, like Bellah, also anticipated that nations would increasingly be supplanted by supra-national structures of political power and belonging. However, for Huntingdon this breaking down of national-cultural distinctions would not lead towards a common global civil religion. Instead, he envisioned that it would lead to a situation in which a series of fundamental cultural differences between major civilizations, in particular between Western, Islamic and Sino-Confucian civilizations, would replace ideology and economics as the primary sources of conflict (1993; 1997).

Since Huntingdon set out this argument, his ideas have been attacked on a number of theoretical and empirical grounds. For example, it has been argued that his thesis relies on a rather dubious ontology of civilizations (Adib-Moghaddam 2008; Sen 1999); that civilization is a relatively poor predictor of preferences for different types of political leadership (Brezna *et al.* 2011); and that current patterns of conflict and international terrorism indicate that the factors that drive these conflicts are more likely to be associated with strategic decision making than with any kind of underlying civilizational tensions (Fox 2002; Neumayer & Plumper 2009).

Yet these critiques have done little to quell the influence of Huntingdon's thesis. This, Bottici and Challand (2006) argue, is because the "clash of civilizations" has moved beyond being an empirically testable hypothesis, to become a "political myth" - a "common narrative by which the members of a social group can provide significance to their political conditions and experience" (2006, p.315) - a status it achieved due to the way it resonated with ascendant political agendas and with the dominant media narratives in the immediate aftermath of the attacks by Al-Qaeda on 9/11 2001 and the subsequent War on Terror (Bonney 2008; Rizvi 2011).

As a result of the diffusion of Huntingdon's thesis, a "clash mentality" (Adib-Moghaddam 2011, p.5) appears to have gained considerable purchase today. In the political sphere, it permeates debates in multiple policy fields in Europe and North America, ranging from foreign policy to public order, social cohesion, and counter-terrorism, while in the public sphere, it continues to pervade many of the media and popular narratives surrounding terrorism and the apparent failures of multiculturalism (Adib-Moghaddam 2011; Angrosino 2002; Bonney 2008; Bottici & Challand 2006).

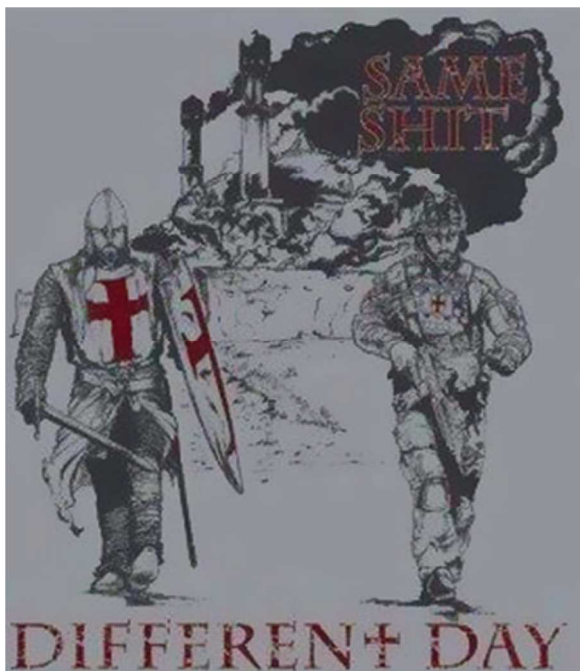
### **'We're the *infidels* of the EDL...'**

It is precisely this "clash mentality" and its attendant references to civilizational boundaries that EDL activists have woven together with the rituals and symbols of *national* belonging that they articulate and perform during demonstrations, meetings, online discussions and other activities. Although activists refer to themselves and to their fellow activists as "patriots", many have also adopted the popular appellation of "infidels", a direct reference to being non-Muslims - one of the most popular songs among EDL activists is about "the infidels of the EDL" who are "coming down the road". The EDL emblem, which incorporates the cross of St. George, the patron saint of England, also contains the EDL motto, "*in hoc signo vinces*" (Figure 1), a phrase associated both with the adoption of Christianity by Emperor Constantine I and with the order of the Knights Templar. Civilizational consciousness is also invoked in the repeated use of images of medieval crusades and crusaders - the symbol *par excellence* of a "clash of civilizations" between a Christian Europe and an Islamic Middle East - as a common motif in the formal and

informal promotional materials that circulate among activists and their supporters (see Figures 2 & 3).



**Figure 1.** EDL emblem and motto.



**Figure 2.** Picture circulated among activists by Facebook early 2012.



**Figure 3.** EDL Essex Division banner. Photograph taken by the author 5 / 5 / 2012.

The EDL website and speeches by the EDL leadership provide particularly rich examples of the way that the group has sought to annex both symbols of the nation and various symbols of “Western culture”. Here, for example one often finds claims about how (militant) Islam threatens “Western values” such as gender equality, human rights, democracy or sexual freedoms – a civilizational discourse - combined with references to how these “Western values” that are enjoyed in England/Britain were achieved through the “sacrifices of our forefathers who gave their lives fighting against Nazi Germany”<sup>vi</sup> – an intensely national discourse.

It appears to have been this ability of movement leaders and activists to effectively combine rituals and symbols of national and civilizational belonging that has been integral to the sustained support enjoyed by the movement. Certainly, activists’ sense of moral purpose<sup>vii</sup> has been greatly enhanced by the way in which appeals both to national identity and civilizational belonging have been used by activists to transform an array of essentially local campaigns often grounded in activists’ concerns about the way that they see their own neighbourhoods changing – a protest against the building of a new mosque, a campaign against companies and institutions that only sell halal meat, or complaints about the opening of a Muslim school – into part of a broader and more existential struggle against the eradication of an imagined English way of life through the “Islamification of Europe”.

## **Conclusions**

In a context of increasing social differentiation, mass immigration and decreasingly clear parameters of state sovereignty, the project of defining “who belongs to the nation and who does not” (Wuthnow 1994, p.131) is one that has become ever more complicated. It is perhaps therefore inevitable that, as Bellah anticipated, national

civil religions will fade, and that some form of global civil religion coloured with universalist values will emerge.

However, while national attachments continue to serve a range of important social, psychological and political functions, it is likely that the shifting intersectionalities between national, local, and supra-national attachments will continue to manifest in diverse constellations of symbols that reflect these different layers of belonging. These will continue to emerge not only through spontaneous responses from within civil society, but also through conscious efforts of political elites and of other factions – such as the raft of new nationalist or far right groups in Europe – who may seek to direct civil religious symbols and rituals towards their own particular cause. As Cristi and Dawson caution, “we have no reason to believe that the political manipulation of civil religious discourses is limited to national contexts” (2007, p.285). So, however civil religious rituals and symbols may combine local, national, supra-national or even universalist themes, they will continue to reflect both the impulse towards societal integration – as manifest for example in the attenuation of rituals of national belonging – and the impulse towards exclusion and the construction of societal boundaries.

The protest performances and narrative of groups like the EDL can provide a particularly interesting, as well as a politically and socially important, example of how these reconfigurations of national civil religions may unfold. At least among the adherents and supporters of the EDL, rituals and symbols of national belonging are being reinvigorated by infusing them with symbols that invoke a form of supra-national belonging – a *civilizational* consciousness. Through this multi-scaling of their narrative, EDL activists have not only drawn on latent affective structures associated with national belonging but have also tapped into a pervasive political and social discourse about a “clash of civilizations” and the threat posed by (militant) Islam to Western national cultures. This has enabled EDL activists to invest their rhetoric and their protest activities with a greatly amplified set of meanings that, in spite of limited organisational resources, internal power struggles and consistently hostile coverage in the mainstream media (Busher 2013), would appear to have done much to generate and maintain support for the group.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, while the national leadership of the EDL has repeatedly claimed that it opposes only what it calls “militant Islam”, a number of speeches given during EDL demonstrations indicate that there is a significant component of the EDL activist community who see themselves as opposing more generally the “Islamification” of the UK. From this point forward I use ‘(militant) Islam’ to represent this ambiguity.

<sup>ii</sup> As well as referring to the growing body of published research on this group, this article also draws on research carried out by the author with EDL activists in Southeast England. This comprises 15 months of overt ethnographic observation; approximately 40 hours of recorded biographic interviews with grassroots activists, and two audio diaries kept by local EDL organisers. While there are clear limitations to this study – most notably the limited geographic distribution of respondents – the extended contact with a relatively small number of activists has facilitated triangulation of data across the three methods of primary data generation.

<sup>iii</sup> “The religious aspect might be derived from attempts to infuse the civil order with a transcendent purpose and legitimacy by using explicitly religious symbols, often rooted in the dominant religion of the nation. Conversely, the religious dimension might be based in mutually meaningful public rituals and symbols that come to be seen as sacred by members of the group” (Cristi 2009, pp.48-9).

<sup>iv</sup> St. George is the patron saint of England.

<sup>v</sup> Informal conversation with EDL activist, male, Dagenham, 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2011

<sup>vi</sup> Author’s paraphrasing of a common refrain in conversations with EDL activists.

<sup>vii</sup> For a discussion of the role of moral outrage and a sense of moral purpose on social movement activism see Jasper 1997, pp.183-228.